3: Mountford E-5 (1948) 1956 OE17 Muragin OE17
TASMANIANS OE 19

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ABORIGINAL ART OF AUSTRALIA

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THE BASIC ART of the Australian aborigines consists of abstract geometric designs which cannot be interpreted without the aid of the artist who produced them. This art form covers the greater part of the continent. In three areas—the Hawkesbury River basin, with Sydney as a centre, north-western Australia and Arnhem Land—this simple form has been overlaid by a more advanced naturalistic art in which identifiable paintings of animals, birds, fish, reptiles and human beings predominate.

For many years it was thought that the Tasmanian aborigines had no form of artistic expression. Recently, however, discoveries of rock engravings have been made in three different localities—Mount Cameron West, Devonport and Trial Harbour.[1] Those at Mount Cameron West were cut into a soft calcareous limestone, but those at Devonport and Trial Harbour are in much harder materials, the former in dialuse, the latter in granite. The designs, which are made up of circles, concentric circles and straight lines, are similar to those the aborigines carved in the rocks on some parts of the mainland. The Tasmanians also painted designs on sheets of bark.[2]

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Victoria and southern New South Wales are poor in examples of aboriginal art. No rock engravings have been found in Victoria, and only four localities of cave paintings are known. Three of these are in the western part of the state and the fourth in the Lake Tyers area of Gippsland.[3] Though there is a paucity of cave paintings, however, the engravings made by the aborigines on their shields and spear-throwers indicate that they possessed an unusual ability for decorative design. The Victorians, like the Tasmanians, also painted designs on the walls of their bark shelters.[4]

The dominant art in north-eastern South Australia and western New South Wales is that of the rock engravings, of which many thousands have been discovered.[5] Although the designs are similar to those of the Tasmanians, the technique of producing them was different. Whereas the Tasmanian engravings appear to have been cut or pounded with a hammer, those in South Australia were made by striking the surface of the rock with a sharp-pointed pebble, producing a series of pits, or indentations. In some instances the subject is only outlined, in others the whole design is removed to the depth of a few millimetres. There are a few rock engravings in the soft Miocene limestone which forms the banks of the River Murray.[6] These engravings resemble those at Mount Cameron

1. Lanham (1956), p. 23.
2. Péron (1807), Pl. 15; Bonney (1875), pp. 49-50.
3. Davidson (1936), p. 77.
4. Smyth (1878), vol. I, p. 292.
5. Mountford (1933), pp. 267-12.
6. Sharnel (1927), pp. 137-40.

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